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ABSTRACT

Rhetorical ethos, or the character of the rhetor as she presents herself in discourse, is vital to the success of any student attempting to enter the universe of academic discourse. According to Aristotle, ethos is demonstrated by showing good sense, good character, and good will. However, in the modern university, with the diversity of population, it is often difficult to teach what is meant by "good." The collaborative learning classroom is the best environment for developing a sense of appropriate ethos because it provides students with a community which has its own standards. It also provides an audience, which enhances in writers a sense of self and of how to accommodate to an audience's values. Through the collaborative learning processes of arguing, writing, and criticizing each other's work, students in one freshman English class learned to demonstrate good sense by being thorough, to demonstrate good character by being honest, and to demonstrate good will by being tactful. Students' writings about their collaborative learning experience indicated that they improved their abilities to express their views and influence their audience's views. (Three references are attached.) (ARH)

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The Development of the Writer's Ethos in Collaborative Learning

Rhetorical ethos, or the character of the rhetor as she presents herself in discourse, is vital to the success of any student attempting to enter the universe of discourse of academia. In a collaborative learning environment, ethos can be best understood not strictly in the classical sense of the "good man, speaking well," since this concept does not define "good" in any way that can account for the cultural and ethnic diversity of students in the modern university. Instead, I see ethos as a social construct fostered within the classroom community and within academia. Students and instructors can work together to help the students master the discourse conventions of the academic discourse community. As a discourse convention crucial to academic success, ethos, which we often discuss in terms of voice, can be learned very effectively in a collaborative learning environment. Such an environment encourages the emergence of communal standards that help the novice writer better understand in concrete terms the concepts of "good sense, good character," and "good will."

A primary tenet of social constructionism is that we all belong to various communities. Communities create knowledge by consensus; they also maintain knowledge and occasionally, again by consensus, revise it. Language is, of course, a primary means by which communities create, maintain, and revise knowledge. In

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this view, then, knowledge is not something objective or available by a simple empirical investigation of concrete reality. Sociologists Berger and Luckman argue, in fact, that reality itself is socially constructed. That is not to say that chaos and relativity should prevail, or even that some hard, empirical facts do not exist, but, as sociologists of science like Kuhn and Rorty have argued, our accessibility to such knowledge is limited by our language and our socially constructed views of reality.

Aristotle identifies three appeals the rhetor may make to the audience to effect persuasion: an appeal to their sense of logic (a logical appeal), to their emotions (a pathetic appeal, from the Greek word pathos, emotions), or to their trust in the rhetor's character. The last is an ethical appeal, from the Greek word ethos, or character. According to Aristotle, ethos is the most persuasive of the appeals available to the rhetor: "for it is not the case, as some writers of rhetorical treatises lay down their 'Art,' that the worth of an orator in no way contributes to his powers of persuasion; on the contrary, moral character [ethos] constitutes the most effective means of proof" (*Rhetoric*.I.ii.4-5).[1] Ethos is demonstrated by three character traits: good sense (or, *phronesis*, also translated as practical wisdom or prudence), moral virtue (or, *arete*, also translated as good character), and good will (or, *eunoia*). The success of any ethical appeal will be improved by demonstrating these traits.

In Classical Greece agreement about what constituted good sense, good will, and good character was less problematic than today because of the nature of

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[1] Cf. *Rhetoric*.III.xvii.12: "If you have proofs, then your language must be both ethical and demonstrative; if you have no enthymemes, ethical only. In fact, it is more fitting that a virtuous man should show himself good than that his speech should be painfully exact."

the audience. In theory, at least, Greek society was cohesive: values were shared by such means as folklore, myth, maxims, and politics. In fact, of course, it was the relatively small and powerful class of males allowed to vote or otherwise participate in public life to whom the rhetors would have to appeal. Women, slaves, and ethnic minorities simply did not count. As S. Michael Halloran has reminded us, the Greeks assumed "that wisdom is open and publically available" (622) and thus could be influenced by an ethical appeal that would cater to to an audience's values.

It follows, I believe, that an individual's demonstration of good sense, good character, or good will (in other words, of what constitutes effective ethos) will be influenced by her community. And conversely, the ethos a speaker or writer choses to project reflects the discourse community in which she participates. As Bruffee might phrase it, a community's agreement over what constitutes good, sense, good will, and good character is a "socially justified belief." For example, consider a student trying to enter, via a freshman English class, the academic discourse community. He will, of course, have ties to many discourse communities, and to various registers or styles of language available to him within those communities. He may have a language and values related to his geographical region, his hobbies, his family, and his age group. He will certainly belong to the community of the schools, and because within that community he is a student, his language, and consequently his ethos, will reflect that role. In the collaborative learning classroom, we are engaged in helping students form a community so that they may help one another enter academia. Our students are learning to play new roles, for which they are required to develop a new sense of appropriate ethos.

I believe that collaborative learning can foster the most condusive atmosphere for the development of a strong, effective ethos. I say this because in my collaborative learning classes I have observed students, as they struggle to influence their peers, drawn into the classroom community where they must accommodate their discourse to community demands. I have no conclusive proof to offer to support my hypothesis. What I do have is experience as a composition instructor in a collaborative classroom and some testimony from students writing about peer critiquing.

We can imagine two levels of learning about ethos occurring in collaborative classroom. On the one hand, students learn to take responsibility for their own words, enhancing their sense of self. The development of ethos is stimulated by their need to assert themselves yet still reach consensus within a community of peers. The result is a new awareness of the self's role in discourse. On the other hand, to achieve their aims, they must accommodate themselves to the demands of an audience, a task which sharpens their argumentation skills and their sense of others. Collaborative learning provides a real audience, one that demands accommodation to its values by actively and regularly responding to students' discourse, both spoken and written.

More than any other classroom, the collaborative learning classroom privileges discourse. The position of discourse makes it more condusive than traditional classrooms to the development of effective ethos. The work of the class is done with students' words, mainly through argument. A great deal of arguing takes place. Within small groups, and later as a class, students must struggle for consensus over such matters as what constitutes proper style or good development. If

the Bruffee text is used, many of the assignments are persuasive. Even when it is not, peer critiques, which require students to respond in writing to each other's work on a number of levels, both stylistic and involving content, encourage a keen awareness of audience reaction. Of course, any classroom may encourage argument, but in the collaborative environment, where feedback seems to be highly valued and consensus, usually in the form of completing some task, is seen as a desirable end, argument itself becomes a legitimate and valued activity. As arguments are waged, students implicitly and explicitly come to define community standards and values, helping them in turn define good sense, good character, and good will.

In many respects I describe the ideal classroom, where students willing participate in debate and in constructing their community values. But the real classroom has parallels to the real world. Within discussions, those who argue best generally prevail. Those who do not argue well may improve by observing their successful peers. Those who do not participate in debate may eventually realize that they are missing a voice in the affairs of the class. Often those who do not at first speak up learn rather quickly to do so. Otherwise, they are soon alienated from the community. Although all students may not be empowered in a collaborative learning classroom, most eventually realize that they disempower themselves when they refuse to participate. However, they do not always choose to do anything about their loss of voice. The same is true for peer critiques. At first, students may not take the critiques seriously. They may hesitate to criticize or be unable to do so tactfully. However, eventually most realize that something is at stake, that if they shirk the responsibility of responding to their peers they not only cheat their

peers but themselves. And they risk offending community standards, for the class soon comes to value participation.

My student Rosemary provides some testimony to this effect. She wrote at the end of her collaborative learning class "I believe that the main point in peer critiquing is [that it] it is only as good or as bad as we make it." Blake, who was more caustic, felt cheated because he had only one critic out of three who satisfied his high standards. He wrote, "it doesn't matter how good the critiquing process is, if you don't have a good critic the whole thing collapses." Blake here indirectly voices a community standard that values participation. Narendra seems to have found a way around Blake's dilemma. He points out "In a collaborative class, everyone has to give 100% or else some of us will get shafted. . . . A teacher can't 'make' a student do a complete job on a peer critique. . ." He went on to discuss grades as a motivator but acknowledged that in spite of peer critiques being graded, students sometimes still do poor critiques. He concluded, "to take advantage of the system, YOU have to do a complete and trustworthy job. At least this way . . . you will learn how to critique your own paper better." In short, students learn that in the collaborative learning classroom they must take responsibility for participating. Silence is neither appreciated nor valued.

The constant dialogue of a good collaborative class fosters practice in developing ethos and helps the class come to value feedback. Because of frequent interaction between speaker/writer and audience, students learn to demonstrate good sense, good will, and good character in concrete terms. They also develop some dependance on their audience. For example, Peter, a student with literary ambitions who seemed heavily invested in the "solitary artiste" mystique, admitted

"Now I know that as individual as my writing may be, I need the input of others." And Pat acknowledged that "other people's critiques of my paper helped a lot. I took their judgments on many subjects such as subject-verb agreements and assumptions very seriously. . . . I knew that since they represented a majority of the reading public they knew what most everybody expects out of a paper. I knew I had to respect their judgments in order to have a paper that was good reading for all."

Lance also illustrates awareness of his readers. He writes: "The most helpful critiques have consistently been those that were written by authors that did a thorough, honest, and tactful job critiquing my paper. Whether I agreed with them or not was usually not a problem for either way I received an honest view of how other readers perceived my paper." Lance's focus on thoroughness, honesty, and tact comes out of Bruffee, and his mention of them shows me that he accepted them as values for a good critique. In discovering the classroom community as a whole values thoroughness, honesty, and tact, Lance learns to construct an effective ethical appeal for his peers. If they believe he shows good sense through thoroughness, good character through honesty, and good will through tact, they will respect his ethos.

First, let us examine how students teach one another to demonstrate good sense by being thorough. They learn that backing up opinions gains audience respect because it shows good sense. Thoroughness comes to mean covering all points and backing up claims. In taking a stand, whether arguing for a sentence revision in a small group or giving an opinion of a peer's style, students are pressured to back up their assertions. Their peers are always asking, why? so what?

how? what do you mean? Here is Pat's testimony: "Through the critiquing process I learned to elaborate on almost every point I brought up both in the critiques I did and in my papers." Saroj also mentions that "a peer critique is especially helpful in pointing out hasty generalizations made by the writer. . . . A peer, without emotional attachment, can . . . look at the writer's paper objectively and see the generalizations . . . "

Next, let us examine how the development of ethos is enhanced by the value students place on honesty. Naturally, by being honest, they demonstrate good character (also good will). At first they may avoid honesty, for they will not want to hurt anyone. But as they receive critiques that are less than honest and thus less than helpful they realize that their audience both values and depends on honesty. As Nina wrote, "peer critics are not always honest because they do not want to step on any toes. This means that the author will miss out on some valuable criticism that could really help to improve his/her paper."

Students' reluctance to be honest because they are afraid to be hurtful is gradually overcome as they learn to define and value tact. Being tactful is, of course, an excellent way to demonstrate good will. In arguing or critiquing, students learn the difficult art of tact and sensitivity to the audience's feelings. Sometimes, especially in writing responses to critiques, they must react to anger and defensiveness or perhaps find alternatives to showing these emotions themselves. Brian, for example, wrote that "instead of being the defensive author, I was able to evaluate my papers more objectively," showing that he had learned to value an objective stance in his writing. Students become particularly sensitive to feelings because they must themselves bear criticism from their peers. (Criticism from the

teacher hardly counts; students learn early on that such criticism is a teacher's job and should not be taken too much to heart. And Pat notes another problem with teacher-based criticisms: "a teacher's criticisms and suggestions seem so ominous sometimes that the student feels . . . the suggestions must be taken.") Whenever a student feels compelled to incorporate a teacher's suggestions, criticism becomes a power play and students do not learn how to accept it gracefully, evaluate it, and either act on it or reject it. When criticism becomes an order, tact is a moot point. When, on the other hand, criticism is something to be evaluated, emotions (such as anger) and thought (such as true intellectual disagreement) can come into play, and tact may be essential in responding. Narendra, who changed from one too willing to sting with his barbs to one gentle but honest and thorough in his critiques, describes how he came to value tact: "I think I can take criticism a little better than before. But more importantly, I can dish it out much better too. [I think]. To be able to criticize without being cruel can sometimes be hard, but now I think I can . . . And this is hard to do, but the peer critiquing process teaches you that."

Perhaps the most interesting example to me of a student developing a strong ethos in a collaborative learning class was Ed. An excellent writer, he had for the most part mastered the academic style, but in a fairly predictable and sterile way. His ethos was of the cardboard cutout variety. He confessed to me a terror of using the first person pronoun in his prose. (Could that be related to the fact that his mother is an English teacher?) I was finally surprised and relieved to read his evaluation of peer critiquing. Here is an excerpt:

> I really liked the peer critique idea, and think that it is long overdue. I think it goes a long way in eliminating the totalitarian/elitist position that many students tend to want to impose on the teacher. For the first time, students realize that their ideas and comments are of value, and can actually help. I have to admit that I was really proud when I was told that my peer critiques were helpful and constructive. There is also another way that student pride comes into play with this process. . . . I think that students are real conscious of what they write in their papers because they are not simply being reviewed by the teacher, but also by a much more important entity: their peers.

Student pride, the power of the peer audience, the value of students' ideas and comments, of helping each other learn within a community of peers. These are the elements of collaborative learning that encourage students to project an ethos that can both express their views powerfully and influence their audience's views.

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The Development of Ethos in the Collaborative Learning Classroom

Students in Freshman English are novices to the academic discourse community and as such are learning the discourse conventions valued by that community. Among the most important of these conventions is ethos, which Aristotle tells us we can demonstrate by showing our good sense, good character, and good will. However, in the modern university, with the diversity of population, it is often difficult to teach what we mean by "good." My experiences in the collaborative learning classroom have led me to believe that it is the best environment for developing a sense of appropriate ethos because it provides students with a community which has its own standards. It also provides an audience, which enhances in writers a sense of self and of how to accommodate to an audience's values. Students in my class not only came to value good sense but also to define it concretely as backing up arguments and claims; they learned also to be honest as a way to demonstrate their good character and to be tactful to demonstrate their good will.